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ABSTRACT

In a leading Nevada school district 35 elementary principals were surveyed to determine their perception of the need for elementary school counselors and the duties they would like a counselor to perform in their schools should counselors become available. Two findings emerged prominently: (1) the principals do want elementary school counselors; and (2) they want them to work directly with students and their teachers and parents rather than in clerical, administrative, and retaliatory behaviors. (Author)

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ELEMENTARY COUNSELOR NEED AND DUTIES -- DO NEVADA'S PRINCIPALS REFLECT THE NATIONAL OPINION?

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ELEMENTARY COUNSELOR NEED AND DUTIES --

DO NEVADA'S PRINCIPALS REFLECT THE NATIONAL OPINION?

In times of financial stress even the most worthy programs must be considered in the light of priorities. For that reason elementary school principals in the Washoe County School District, Reno, Nevada were surveyed regarding their perception of the need for and the duties of elementary school counselors should placement of counselors in their schools become possible. The process and questionnaire are being shared here in the hope that other school districts with similar circumstances might benefit from this experience. If the positive response given by Nevada's principals does reflect the opinion of principals nationally, giving elementary counseling a high priority seems indicated.

Background

Concern is wide-spread that, for whatever reasons, schools are falling short of public expectations. Rising discipline problems and declining achievement test scores challenge the schools best efforts. While several solutions are needed, many schools across the country are enlisting the aid of elementary school counselors as a major means of addressing difficulties. They believe that early identification of problems and early preventive assistance to children, their parents, and their teachers offers more hope than corrective measures after years of discouragement and misbehavior. It is simply easier, more economical, and more humane to influence a young child than a defeated and embittered adolescent.

Ten years ago the potential of elementary school counseling was recognized by a National Institute of Mental Health Commission comprised of 16 member associations including the American Association of School Administrators, the American Medical Association, the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Association of Social Workers, the National Education Association, and the Council for Exceptional Children. The Commission recommended a ratio of one counselor to 300-600 elementary school students and one counselor to 300 high school students (Eckerson and Smith, 1966).

Since the NIMH Commission convened in 1962, the number of elementary counselors has increased nationally from 500 in 1963, 6400 in 1969, and 10,075 in 1972 to an estimated 12,000 in 1976 (Gallese, 1976). In recent years, according to the same source, several states have expanded the service rapidly. North Carolina, with 486 elementary counselors, has more than quadrupled its staff since 1972, and Florida with 782 and Tennessee with 180 have more than doubled in the same period. Six other states: Maine, New Hampshire, Texas, West Virginia, North Dakota, and South Dakota have expanded at least 50 percent. Wisconsin passed a law in 1973 requiring its 425 districts to provide elementary counselors. Hawaii has passed legislation aimed at a 1 to 500 elementary counselor-student ratio (APGA, 1975).

In Nevada during 1975-76 there were fewer than 10 elementary school counselors and more than 60,000 elementary school students in 170 schools. An increase in counseling at the elementary school level in Nevada has been called for by the Nevada State Board of Education, the Nevada State Education Association, the Nevada Parent Teachers Association, local school organizations, state and private mental health agencies, and repeatedly by the Nevada Personnel and Guidance Association.

In surveys made during the 1960's, administrators in other places indicated that they recognized a need for elementary counselors (Shertzer and Lundy, 1964) and that the duties of such counselors should be directed toward counseling, consultation, and coordination rather than to administration (Foster, 1967; California State Department of Education, 1965; Swan, 1963). Principals also expressed some desire that the counselor's background should include course work in psychology, counseling and guidance, and experience as an elementary school teacher (McDougall and Reitan, 1963).

Those early conclusions were supported and extended in a national survey made in 1973 through the joint efforts of the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the American School Counselor Association. From 48 of the 50 states, 279 principals responded indicating that 32 percent of the schools involved had a counselor--12 percent full-time. Within the eight American School Counselor Association regions of the country, the seven Far West states of Region 8 ranked second with 39 percent of the schools having counselors. They were behind Region 2 (Delaware, District of Columbia, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania) where 45 percent reported having counselors. Region 3, Appalachia, with 19 percent, had the fewest counselors.

Duties of the counselor given a high priority by principals in the ASCA/NAESP Study were: individual and group counseling with students, counselor consultation with teachers and parents, working with referral agencies, working as a member of a team, and providing information about the counseling program. Low priority was given to: teaching, discipline, record-keeping, lunchroom and playground duties, scheduling and administrative duties. Less time, they felt, should be spent as advocates for students and more time in research, leading inservice programs for teachers, and with parent groups and career education (ASCA, 1973).

Against this backdrop of national figures, an effort was made to assess the situation in the Washoe County School District which serves the Reno, Sparks, North Lake Tahoe, and northeast Nevada areas with 35 elementary schools (grades K-5), eight middle schools (grades 6-8), and eight high schools (grades 9-12). Total enrollment for 1975-76 (when the survey was made) was 30,548 of whom 8,412 were high school students served by 27.3 FTE counselors and 7,518 middle school students served by 23 counselors. The counselor-student ratios for the secondary schools were not too far off the NIMH recommendation (1 to 300) with 1 to 317 and 1 to 320 respectively.

The intent of the District to serve counseling needs at least as low as the sixth grade can be seen in the placement of an additional counselor in each of eight middle schools when grade six was added to grades seven and eight there in 1975. Such a placement constituted a major counseling addition in one year.

Nevertheless, the imbalance of the counselor-student ratio at the K to 5 level was another matter. The District's 13,400 elementary school children had only two counselors assigned. Although the two worked in only six schools, the District-wide elementary school counselor ratio per pupil was actually 1 to 6,700. When the ratio within the six schools was considered, the two counselors were trying to serve 3,368 pupils at a ratio of 1 to 1,684 or 280 percent of the 1 to 600 maximum recommended by NIMH. The implication of these figures is even more serious when recognition is given the fact that the six schools were chosen because the children there were especially needy. Lack of supervision by parents, many of whom work in a 24-hour tourist economy, and high mobility creates school problems. The District average pupil turnover per school year was 44 percent in 1975-76 with some schools experiencing as high as 78, 87, and 90 percent turnover.

How principals within this situation would view the need of counselors and their role, thus, became the subject of this study.

The Survey of Principals

A questionnaire of fifteen items was administered to each principal by mail or personal interview. Returns were received from 30 of the 35 principals. An N of 30, 85 percent return, was thus established.

Results

The first and most apparent revelation of these data is the firm evidence that the principals of the Washoe County School District do want elementary school counselors and they rank the need for their services with a high priority.

To an open-ended question (Table 1) 83 percent indicated a desire for the immediate assignment of a counselor to their school. The next most frequently requested service was that of a reading specialist which was requested by 20 percent of the principals. Another 20 percent already had reading specialists.

Table 1
What special services would you like to have in your school in the immediate future?

Service	Responses	Percentage of N
Counselor	25	83
Reading specialist	6	20
P.E. teacher	5	16
Librarian	4	13
Nurse	3	10
Remedial/Resource teachers	3	10
Social worker	2	6
Remedial math	2	6
Gifted student program	1	3
Art teacher	1	3
Special education teacher	1	3
Vice principal	1	3
Teacher aides	1	3
Secretary	1	3
"None"	1	3

Next, principals (16 and 13 percent respectively) requested positions for physical education teachers and librarians, none of which existed in the district. Ten percent wanted their part-time nurse services increased to full time and a like number wanted a resource specialist, a new position within the district.

Again, when asked to prioritize their need for a counselor 67 percent ranked the counselor as number one and 90 percent ranked the counselor as number one or two.

In the second firm statement of the survey, principals indicated that they want counselors to work directly with students and their teachers and parents in problem-solving and growth producing ways rather than in clerical, administrative, and retaliatory behaviors.

On a four-position scale of preference for counselor duties (Table 2), the principals placed the following in position number one: individual counseling (86 percent), consulting with teachers (67 percent), consulting with parents (60 percent), and group counseling and group guidance (53 percent).

When the first and second of four ranks were considered, duties preferred included: individual counseling (96 percent), consulting with teachers (93 percent), family counseling (89 percent), group counseling (86 percent), coordinating activities related to counseling (86 percent), consulting with parents (83 percent), implementing recommendations of psychological services (80 percent), and utilizing community resources (62 percent).

In limiting the counselor role, the principals rejected other duties with equal certainty. In the lowest rank of a four-point scale, they placed discipline (93 percent) and playground and cafeteria supervision (90 percent).

In the lowest two ranks they included ability grouping of students (92 percent), maintaining records (90 percent), developing career awareness (73 percent), and group testing (63 percent).

Table 2
Rate the following counselor functions according to the given scale.

	1		2		3		4	
	#	%-N	#	%-N	#	%-N	#	%-N
a. Group testing (administration and interpretation)	3	10	8	26	6	20	13	43
b. Individual counseling	26	86	3	10	1	3	--	--
c. Group Counseling and Group Guidance	16	53	10	33	3	10	1	3
d. Consulting w/parents at school & home	18	60	7	23	3	10	2	6
e. Consulting with teachers	20	67	8	26	-	--	2	6
f. Referral to school specialists	9	30	10	33	7	23	4	13
g. Coordinating activities related to counseling; i.e., nurses, case workers, juvenile officers	14	46	9	30	5	16	2	6
h. Interpreting school records to comply with the privacy act	4	13	9	30	7	23	10	33
i. Family counseling	13	43	8	26	7	23	2	6
j. Parent education	10	33	9	30	7	23	4	13
k. Developing career awareness	3	10	5	16	12	40	10	33
l. Utilizing community resources	5	16	14	46	7	23	4	13
m. Implementing recommendations of psychological services	12	40	12	40	4	13	2	6
n. Ability grouping of students	2	6	6	20	8	26	14	46
o. Maintaining records	2	6	4	13	11	37	13	43
p. Playground and cafeteria supervision	-	-	1	3	2	6	27	90
q. Discipline	-	-	1	3	1	3	28	93
r. Placement of pupils	-	-	14	46	5	16	10	33

In the third positive finding of the survey the principals revealed preferences for counselor time and assignment. They had no preferences for either a man or a woman in the position, but they did want someone who had teaching experience (76 percent). And they wanted one counselor per 300 students (70 percent) or at least a ratio of one counselor per 500 students or less (90 percent). They preferred having a counselor full time (83 percent) rather than sharing the counselor's time under other arrangements.

In a district where the present guidance services for the elementary schools come largely from an overburdened central office staff of 5.5 school psychologists, the additional service of elementary school counselors was seen by 86 percent of the principals as potentially helpful in reducing the case-load of the existing system.

Summary

Thirty elementary school principals were surveyed to determine the priority they would assign to the services of an elementary school counselor, the nature of the counselor's role as they perceived it, and their preferred assignment ratio.

Responses indicated a high priority for full-time counselors at a ratio of one counselor for up to 500 students. The principals wanted counselors to have had teaching experience, and they preferred that their duties would include individual and group counseling and consultation with teachers and parents as opposed to discipline, playground and cafeteria supervision, and clerical tasks.

If the priorities revealed by this survey were implemented, the principals felt that the resulting counseling services would ameliorate difficulties before they became crisis referrals, as often occurs in the present overtaxed system of psychological services.

The findings of this survey corraborated those of earlier studies.

Postscript

Besides the direct results of the survey, the fact that the survey was held, questions were asked, and duties were ranked stimulated administrative thought about elementary counseling. Also, during the school year additional circumstances

pointed up the need for school counseling. The positive result, for a combination of reasons, was the addition of 1.5 full-time-equivalent counselors in 1976-77, and two full-time counselors in 1977-78. Each full-time counselor is assigned to two elementary schools, bringing the half-time counselor coverage to one-third of the schools in the district. Although small, the additions are the first at the elementary level in years and they represent an expressed interest among policy-makers to expand elementary school counseling slowly but steadily in the future. The data and process of this survey support that movement locally and perhaps elsewhere.

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